

## OPERATIONS BEHAVIORAL HEALTH



# BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

A focus on physical, mental, emotional, spiritual  
and social well-being provides a balanced  
approach to fire fighter wellness

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**F**ire fighters put their own lives at risk to help protect and save the lives of others, often in high-risk environments. As such, it is important for them to have a strong sense of psychological and emotional well-being so they can do their job to the best of their abilities. Fire fighter behavioral health is defined as the state of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social well-being that allows fire fighters to perform their job duties safely and effectively. It includes aspects such as stress management, communication skills, self-care practices, resilience building and healthy lifestyle habits.

Fire fighters are constantly exposed to stressful and potentially traumatic situations that can take a toll on their behavioral health. It is therefore essential for them and their departments to prioritize behavioral health to remain effective in their job. Fire fighters experience physical, emotional and psychological stress due to the hazardous environments they work in and the difficult tasks they must perform. They also may be affected by traumatic events, such as significant fires, large-scale accidents, multiple-casualty events, and other natural and man-made disasters. As a result of these experiences, it's not uncommon for fire fighters to suffer from depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse problems or other behavioral health issues, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2018). It is important for fire departments to understand the behavioral health risks associated with these events and take steps to promote fire fighter behavioral health wellness at all stages of the career lifespan.

Promoting behavioral health is an important practice that is being increasingly embraced by fire departments all around the world. It involves promoting mental, spiritual, emotional, social and physical health among fire fighters to ensure their overall well-being, both on and off the job. This proactive approach helps reduce the impact of negative behavioral health outcomes. Ultimately, it serves to help keep fire fighters safe and healthy so they can continue doing the important work they do every day. Taking care of one's behavioral and physical health is essential to living a balanced life and can be achieved through activities such as learning about behavioral health issues, mindfulness, stress management, consuming nutritious meals, engaging in regular physical activity, fostering healthy social relationships and practicing healthy self-care activities. This is what is becoming known as resiliency training. By implementing these strategies into their lives, fire fighters can better manage the stressors they face on the job while also improving their overall quality of life.

While encouraging and developing resiliency, fire fighters, officers, members of administration and their fire departments need to be aware of the signs that indicate someone may be progressing toward a behavioral health crisis. Early identification of these signs can help prevent more serious issues from arising, while also ensuring that the individual has access to the necessary resources for successful recovery. It is essential to understand the importance of being proactive in recognizing these signs and providing fire fighters with appropriate resources and support to maintain good behavioral health.



### SIGNS THAT A FIRE FIGHTER MAY BE PROGRESSING TO A CRISIS INCLUDE:

- **Increased irritability**
- **Difficulty sleeping**
- **Changes in appetite**
- **Withdrawal from friends or family**
- **Increased substance use**
- **Changes in emotional responses**
- **Changes in normal behavior**
- **Increased isolation**

If identified early, these signs can be addressed before they become more serious problems. It is important for fire fighters to recognize these signs so they can get the help they need before it becomes too late.

Many fire fighters are unable to realize they are in a behavioral health crisis until it is too late. Fire fighters may not be aware of the signs and symptoms of mental health issues, or they may be reluctant to seek help due to the stigma associated with seeking help for mental health issues. Fire fighters also may struggle with limited access to local available mental health resources. Other fire fighters may feel they cannot take the necessary time off to pursue mental health help—especially if they are supporting a family and juggling multiple jobs or life roles. All these factors contribute to fire fighters being unable to realize they are in a behavioral health crisis until it is too late.

Fire fighter peer support teams are essential for the behavioral health of fire fighters. By providing access to confidential, one-on-one engagement and a safe space to talk about their experiences, trained peer supporters help fire fighters identify when they need help and how to access it.

Peer support teams have been widely recognized as a successful method for improving behavioral health among fire fighters. Studies, including a 2021 study published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, indicate that peer support has been effective in reducing stress, increasing job satisfaction, motivating fire fighters to seek the help of mental health professionals, and guiding them to seek appropriate treatment programs for substance abuse. They provide a confidential, safe space for fire fighters to talk about their shared lived experiences without fear or judgment. The close relationships that are developed through peer support also create a sense of trust, which can lead to better communication, collaboration, problem-solving, increased help-seeking behaviors and resiliency within a department.

Peer support teams, fire fighters, chaplains, fire administration staff, families and friends all play an important role in providing ongoing support for fire fighters in need. They can provide invaluable behavioral health support to fire fighters during the initial portion of their recovery process by simply being present. Through compassionate dialogue and understanding, they can help provide meaningful comfort and companionship for those who are going through a difficult recovery period. They also can provide practical assistance, such as helping with responsibilities outside of work or providing connections to relevant resources. Moreover, they can help create an environment that is conducive to recovery by reducing any stigma associated with seeking help. Departments that want to learn more about how and when to provide these types of support activities can check out “Helping Members in Recovery,” a new online course from the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF). Learn more about the course at [iaff.org/behavioral-health](http://iaff.org/behavioral-health).

Many fire fighters feel there is a stigma associated with seeking help for mental illness because it is perceived by some as a sign of weakness. A 2017 survey conducted by IAFF found that that up to 92% of surveyed fire fighters indicate this stigma as a reason for their unwillingness to get help.

For a long time, fire departments have addressed behavioral health issues through department discipline. Disciplining someone with a behavioral health crisis can have unintended consequences for the person and those around them, while failing to address the source of the problem. Rather than disciplining members with a behavioral health issue, it is essential that we take decisive steps toward greater understanding and appropriate support for those who are facing various kinds of behavioral health crises. We must create an environment where fire fighters feel safe, supported and respected to ensure that individuals with behavioral health issues are not subjected to unnecessary discipline or punishment. Can you imagine a fire fighter being disciplined for breaking their leg while working on duty? Why then would we discipline a fire fighter for substance abuse that developed while coping with unprocessed traumatic exposure?